

Full House Committee on Oversight and Reform

Hearing on:

"Identifying, preventing and Treating Childhood Trauma: A Pervasive Public Health Issue..."

Written Testimony

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Survivor and Activist

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I would like to thank Congressman Cummings, ranking member Jordan and the members of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, for this opportunity to speak about the lasting effects that childhood trauma has had on my life.

My name is Creeana Aviles-Rygg, I'm 28 years old and from Helena, Montana where I have lived for most of my life. I am Portuguese, Filipino, and Hispanic, my family is all from the Hawaiian Islands and moved to the mainland before I was born, in hopes to give my mother, who became pregnant with me at the age of 16, a fresh start and chance at a better life.

Both my grandmother and my mother are victims of sexual abuse, neither of them had ever received help or justice for their trauma, in fact abuse became something that wasn't even acknowledged in our family because it was considered "normal" or just the price you paid to be supported and have a place to live. My mother's first marriage was to a man who physically and verbally abused her, although she tried to shield my younger siblings and I from it, we witnessed her being hit, shoved and even sat on by him in order to prevent her from being able to leave. After several escape attempts, she finally got us away from him, I was 9 years old at the time, we settled down in a new town where she met her second husband, Raul.

Raul was kind to my mom and seemed to love me and my siblings, however, as I got older he changed. I was 11 years old when Raul began abusing me, it started with him groping my body in a sexual way and pretending he mistook me for my mother. At the time, I didn't know this was a form of sexual abuse and I didn't know how to tell my mom, I didn't want to be the one to break up our family after all we had already been through. As the abuse continued I began to distance myself from him which made him lash out at me in violent ways. He once beat me so badly that our neighbors heard my screams and called the police, this was my first open case with the Department of Family Services, they came and took pictures of the bruises all over my body and Raul was arrested but unfortunately the case was closed and Raul was back in our home by the next week.

I by the time I was twelve years old I was so depressed I had stopped eating and was beginning to self-harm, still unable to tell my mom what was going on, she became worried and had me admitted into a children's hospital. There I was diagnosed with

bipolar depression and heavily medicated for 3 months until I was gaining weight again and behaving well enough to go home. I was released and just before my 13th birthday, Raul raped me.

This time I did tell my mom and we went to the police. I was examined at the hospital and Raul was arrested the next day, they found him with scratches all over his face and body just as I had described as I fought to get free. All of the evidence of what he had done was there, but he knew my mom could not live with herself knowing she had allowed me to get hurt, he knew she was vulnerable from the day he met us and he manipulated her once again into believing I was just a bad child, trying to ruin her happy life for my own selfish reasons. Eventually, she was in denial that he had done anything wrong and I was taken by DFS and placed in group homes for run a way kids, I was on juvenile probation, then lived in foster care before being placed in the Florence Crittenton home for pregnant teens. I was 14 years old and 4 months pregnant when I arrived. It was at Florence Crittenton that I was finally treated from the traumatic experiences I had survived. I attended therapy sessions and learned that more than half the girls living there at the time were also survivors of sexual and/or violent crimes.

After my case had gone to trial and Raul was sentenced to prison, I was able to go back home with my mother. Everything had happened so fast and now I had a baby to take care of, mine as well as my mother's mental health was put on the back burner and we did what we knew best and moved forward. Raul unable to hurt me anymore but I still lived in fear every day, I had a hard time developing healthy relationships as an adult, I had major trust issues with every man that came into my life, including my 3rd step-father. I was 22 years old when I met my husband Jason, I was still having night terrors regularly. My husband would have to calm me down and help me back to sleep, it took me years to be calm in my own house and not jump every time he walked up behind me. We are now raising 3 children together and like any parent I fear that the worst could happen to them, I try to have open conversations about abuse with them so they can recognize it if they experience or witness it and I help them understand how they can tell someone and get help. I am determined to end the cycle of abuse in my family with me.

I am now involved in national advocacy work for young parents and survivors of adverse childhood experiences through National Crittenton, I have held group meetings at my local Florence Crittenton agency where I share my story and give the participants a safe, judgement free space to talk openly about their experiences and try to support them in their journey to healing.

Looking back, I feel as if I slipped through all of the cracks in the agencies that are designed to protect children from trauma. I was labeled as a troubled youth when really I just needed someone to recognize I was being hurt.

Sexual abuse is an epidemic in our nation, studies have found that up to 89% of child sexual abuse victims are female, and of all the females raped in the U.S. 41% are under the age of 18. [Source: *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2017 Summary Report.*]

For youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system, the girls' rate of sexual abuse is four times higher than boys in juvenile justice and the girls rate of complex trauma is nearly twice as high. [Source: Michael T. Baglivio et al., US Dep't of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, *The Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) in the Lives of Juvenile Offenders*, 3 J. Juv. Justice, 9 Spring 2014]

What Congress can do to help is make sure that schools, foster homes, group homes, and juvenile justice facilities provide services that support girls in healing from experiences that caused the trauma they faced and make a change from just looking at what we did and ask first what has happened to us.

Hundreds of thousands of girls have and will face similar experiences as I did and they each deserve a chance to be valued, respected and supported when asking for help in healing. They each deserve a chance to live a healthy and happy life, not as victims but as survivors.

Thank you for listening to my story, I hope it will provide insight to this subject and a sense of urgency to provide more resources to survivors of traumatic experiences.

Respectfully,

Creeana Aviles-Rygg

Survivor and Activist